Chapter IX

Factors that Contribute to the Success of Knowledge Management Communities of Practice

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Abstract

A community of practice (CoP) is an organizational form that promotes sense making, knowledge management, and learning. It is important to understand how and why these communities form and grow over time. These questions are explored in a qualitative analysis of a knowledge management (KM) community of practice. This case study includes a description of how the organization formed, survived, grew, and matured over a five-year period (1999-2004). Several practices and structures related to CoP development are identified: operations, roles and responsibilities, communications, subgroup structures, use of information technologies, and other aspects of organizing. Using data from several sources (e.g., membership surveys, interviews with key informants, document analysis), four sets of critical success factors are identified: Individual factors, content factors, meeting factors, and organizational factors. These factors are arranged into a descriptive model of the function and structure of CoPs over the life cycle. This work also sheds light on how to set up and successfully grow a community of practice.
Overview and Objectives

A successful community of practice (CoP) has the ability to sustain and renew itself over time (Barab & Duffy, 2000). This observation raises several questions. How are CoPs formed? Why do some survive? What is inherent in the structures and operations of successful CoPs that allow them to stay in existence? What other critical success factors are required, such as intrinsic or extrinsic rewards for members? The purpose of this study is to better understand communities of practice, how and why they form, and what sustains them over time.

The answers can shed light on loosely structured extraorganizational and intraorganizational forms and the factors that lead to their success over the life cycle. We define CoP success here as effectively forming, being in existence for a significant period of time, and showing continued signs of growth and development. This work also provides insight for individuals who wish to set up a successful, long-term CoP within their organizations as part of a broad KM strategy. For those specifically interested in developing KM-centered communities of practice, this study provides insights into the formation, survival, and growth of such structures.

Review: Toward a Shared Definition of Communities of Practice

This work is grounded in the literature on communities of practice (CoPs), organizational memory (OM), and knowledge management (KM). The concept of a community of practice has emerged as a useful construct to describe a social form that has been in existence for centuries (e.g., guilds) but recently has been rediscovered in the context of corporations and applications in knowledge management. The concept owes its early modern formulation to the works of Lave (1988), Wenger (1998), Lave and Wenger (1991), and Brown and Duguid (1991, 2001). The initial works focused on the shared meaning and knowledge that developed in occupational groups such as midwives and butchers (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003) and repair specialists (Iverson & McPhee, 2002). It is now applied to any knowledge-sharing group within and between organizations (Brown & Duguid, 2001; Swan, Scarbrough, & Robertson, 2002) and is viewed as a nontechnical component of many knowledge management strategies.

Definition

The definition of a community of practice has evolved over time. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) see a CoP as a set of people who “share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an on-going basis” (p. 4). Buysse, Sparkman, and Wesley (2003) observe, “[A] community of practice generally can be defined as a group of professionals and other stakeholders in pursuit of a shared learning enterprise, commonly focused on a particular topic” (p. 4).
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